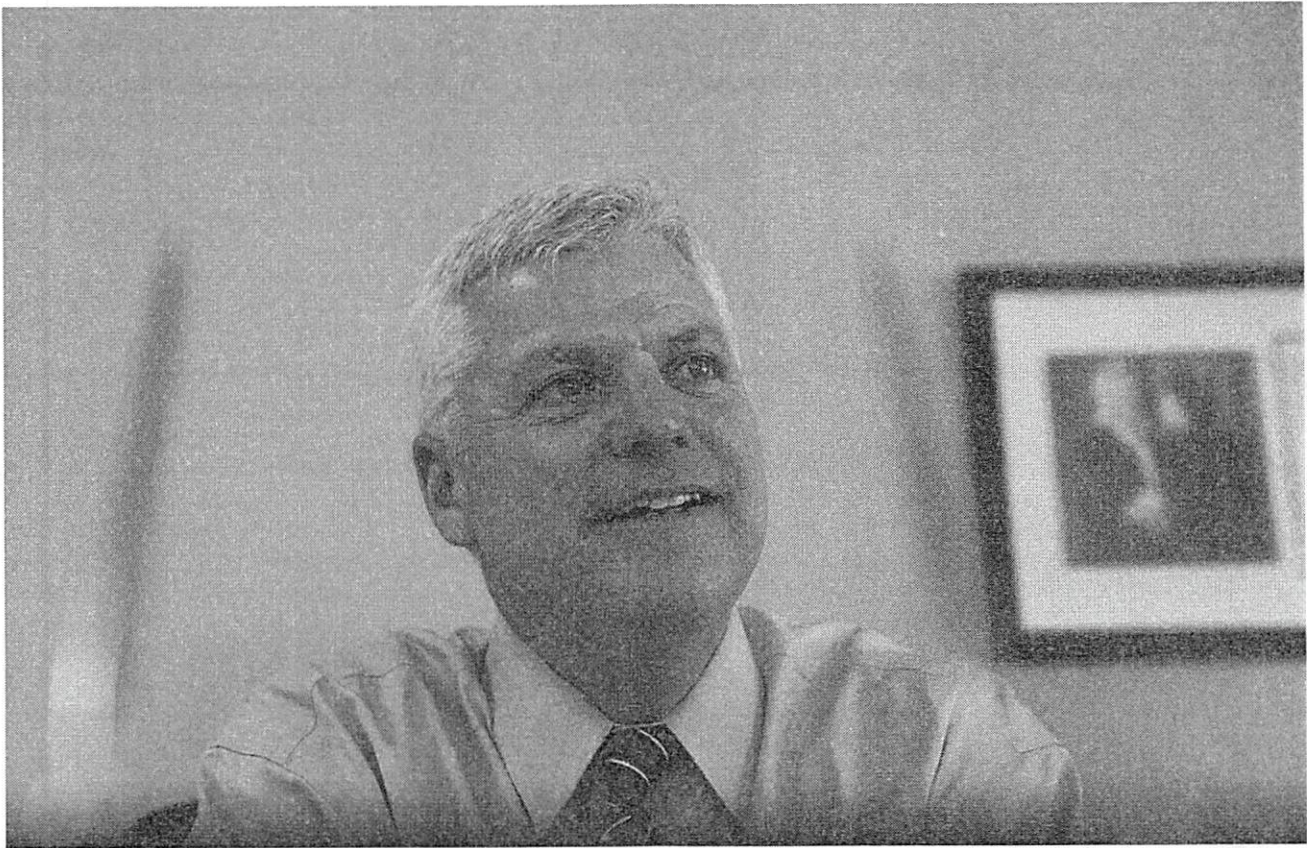


LAWRENCE HARMON

# Conley loses temper and respect of voters



WENDY MAEDA/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

Daniel Conley.



By Lawrence Harmon | GLOBE COLUMNIST AUGUST 08, 2013



SUFFOLK DISTRICT Attorney Dan Conley lost both his temper and the respect of some voters at a meet-and-greet Monday night in Roxbury. Conley boasts the largest war chest among the dozen candidates in the mayoral field. But money can't buy the

Conley was sailing through his opening remarks to a mostly black audience at Flames restaurant in Grove Hall, a high-crime area of the city. Organizers from the sponsoring group, Greatest Minds, said they were pleased that Conley had accepted the invitation to a neighborhood where some people view him mainly as part of the system that locked up their relatives. Conley effectively countered that perception by emphasizing the role of his office in serving as the voice for victims of crime and abuse. He described his desire to “drill down into the lives” of offenders and fix the systems — especially the city’s public schools — that failed them. It was a good effort. Conley came across as more than just an aggressive prosecutor who is driven to win regardless of cost.

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Things fell apart during the question-and-answer period. The candidate took immediate umbrage at audience questions posed by Cornell Mills, the son of imprisoned former state senator Dianne Wilkerson. Conley sent a charge through the room when he told his listeners that he had terminated Mills from his civilian investigator position in the DA’s office years earlier. Clearly these two men had bad history.

Maybe Mills had come solely to bait Conley. But Mills’s questions, per se, weren’t out of line. They focused on the city’s unimpressive homicide clearance rate, the use of state funds to protect witnesses, and Conley’s record of hiring minority managers in the DA’s office. A visibly angry Conley offered partial answers, at best. He did better engaging a question posed by activist Jamarhl Crawford on the district attorney’s record of investigating police-involved shootings. But the conversation had deteriorated by then.

It got stranger. As Conley prepared to leave, he leaned over me and said that he doubted that the presence of a columnist at this forum was “an accident,” intimating that I had been tipped off about a potential confrontation. Conley then referred to Mills and Crawford as “knuckleheads” and departed.

For the record, I would have made a special effort to see how a leading mayor or candidate might respond to provocations. But I received no tip that such a situation was about to take place, or any tip, for that matter. I had come to see four formidable candidates who were on the bill that night — Conley, Bill Walczak, Marty Walsh, and Charlotte Golar Richie. I was also hungry and enjoy the Caribbean-inspired food at Flames.

Conley's performance left the audience confused and disappointed. Gisella Soriano of Dorchester said she didn't like the attitudes of Conley's questioners. But she was surprised that the candidate stooped to their level.

"It made Conley look unprofessional," she said.

Campaigning is exhausting. Everyone has bad nights. But Conley was still steaming the next day. He reiterated that his "integrity, honesty, and fairness" had been impugned by his questioners.

"Everyone is entitled to get angry when their integrity is attacked," said Conley.

Conley said that Mills was merely looking to embarrass him, not seeking answers to legitimate questions. Perhaps. But Conley missed the point: Others in the room with no animosity toward the candidate wanted to hear his in-depth responses to Mills's questions. Conley had a chance to educate voters and show coolness under fire. Instead, he missed both opportunities while playing into the stereotype of an overly suspicious prosecutor.

Conley does have a strong record to run on in neighborhoods that are disproportionately affected by crime. As district attorney, he helped found a family justice center for victims of child, domestic, and sexual abuse. He cleared a backlog of gun cases and focused relentlessly on prosecuting perpetrators of gang violence. And he did it while protecting civil liberties. Conley, for example, has been honored by the Boston Bar Association for pushing efforts to improve witness identification procedures and reopening cases involving questionable convictions. He not only preaches transparency on cases of excessive use of force by police, but practices it as well.

It's not his record, however, that anyone should worry about. In this specific encounter, at least, Conley showed himself to be quick to anger and slow to cool down. That's not an especially desirable combination in a political leader.

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